

JUDY MANN

McNamara's War Reparations

I suspect former secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara has no earthly idea what kind of raw wounds he has reopened with the publication of "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam." The bloodless title gives a clue, though, about where his head is at, as we used to say.

I don't know a single family, including mine, that has not paid for America's involvement in that war. Some of us got busted in anti-war demonstrations, speaking out on what we only suspected but McNamara knew. Some of us have relatives who still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders and can't hold down jobs. Still others are caring for veterans who were disabled in the war. And then there are the families who paid the ultimate price. All this in a war that McNamara decided couldn't be won as early as 1966 or 1967, six or so years and some 42,000 more dead before we finally got out.

McNamara now says ignorance was a guiding light in our early involvement in Vietnam. "Our government lacked experts for us to consult to compensate for our ignorance about Southeast Asia," he claims. The State Department, he tells us, had lost its top China specialists during the McCarthy hysteria. That's true. But there were plenty of other specialists around, among them Bernard B. Fall, the French journalist who was able to get into Hanoi to interview Ho Chi Minh. In July 1962, after he'd spent a week in Hanoi, Fall briefed an American correspondent, telling him that the war basically was an indigenous independence movement and that North Vietnam was neither a puppet nor a client of China's, as the U.S. propaganda machine was starting to insist. He estimated it would take 10 to 12 combat troops to pacify and neutralize one guerrilla. At one point, the U.S. correspondent asked him why he didn't tell that to the people in Washington. Fall answered that he had tried to talk to the State Department and to the Pentagon but that folks there wouldn't listen. They wouldn't listen later when he wrote learned, nuanced pieces for such publications as The Washington Post. And as time went on, those of us with long memories can remember, the folks in Washington did something worse than not listen: They tried to paint Fall as something between a communist sympathizer and an enemy agent. Fall was killed in February 1967 by a mine blast in South Vietnam. The expertise was there. But people like McNamara were not tuning in.

Veterans organizations are outraged that McNamara continued to send men to an unwinnable war. The American Legion wants him to donate profits from his book to programs to help veterans.

"We ought to take the phrase 'put Vietnam behind us' and bury it," says Phil Budahn, a Legion spokesman. "We will be dealing with the Vietnam legacy for as long as we have Vietnam vets." He said the Legion has been taking an unusually large volume of calls from members about the McNamara book, including calls from veterans' mothers. "They still remember sending their sons off to war," he says. "It is still a powerful memory for them 25 years later. And for them to find out that one of the folks who sent their child into harm's way thought at the time it wasn't serving any purpose—it just really angers them."

The Veterans of Foreign Wars also has called on McNamara to donate the profits from the book to the families of those killed or missing in action. "It's a travesty that someone would make money on the graves of the 58,000 who lost their lives in Vietnam," VFW Executive Director Bob Currie said.

"The question that keeps ringing in everybody's ears is: If we knew it was a lost cause, why did it take six years to get out?" says James Brazee, president of the Vietnam Veterans of America. "How many tens of thousands of lives were affected by our remaining in Vietnam? There are still so many veterans and families suffering from the effects of this war. For McNamara to attempt to get forgiveness for his sins and at the same time profit from the book is ludicrous. He certainly didn't do the honorable thing back in 1967. He ought to do it today. The honorable thing is to turn those profits over to the veterans organizations that are still dealing with the aftermath of a war he helped contribute to."

The range of projects McNamara could assist is vast. There's Agent Orange research and programs to help children whose parents were exposed to it. The Agent Orange Class Assistance Program has 72 projects across the country. There are the families of those killed or missing in action. There are veterans centers and homeless shelters that still are trying—after all these years—to put shattered lives back together. Brazee's right: There is one last honorable thing McNamara can do. The question is, how long will it take for him to figure it out?